



News Release

For Immediate Release

September 27, 2018

Weak Governance and Operational Practices at NPCA: Auditor General

(TORONTO) The Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority (NPCA) has taken steps to improve its operations and has several initiatives under way. However, it still has significant operational issues to address in order to restore public trust and deliver its programs and services economically, efficiently and effectively, Auditor General Bonnie Lysyk said in a Special Report released today.

“Our audit also found that the governance structure established in the *Conservation Authorities Act* (Act) and weaknesses in the NPCA Board’s oversight were two of the key contributors to the operational problems at the NPCA that have been the subject of public concerns and criticisms.”

The Report noted that some NPCA Board members (a majority of whom are elected officials, such as mayors and councillors) involved themselves in the day-to-day operations of the NPCA. Their involvement was not always perceived as positive by employees of the NPCA and the public.

Under the Act, board members of conservation authorities are authorized to “vote and generally act on behalf of their respective municipalities.” This can put board members in a difficult position when municipal interests conflict with the responsibilities of conservation authorities and their employees.

In light of mounting concerns and criticism of the NPCA, the Standing Committee on Public Accounts of the Legislative Assembly asked the Auditor General last year to conduct an audit of the NPCA. The NPCA, established in 1959, oversees a watershed that covers the entire Niagara region, along with parts of the City of Hamilton and Haldimand County.

Each of the Province’s 36 conservation authorities is responsible to protect an individual watershed—an area of land that drains or “sheds” rain and melted snow into a common body of water—from flooding and erosion. About 90% of Ontarians live in areas managed by a conservation authority.

Some specific operational issues identified in the audit included:

- In the absence of a long-term staffing plan, the NPCA implemented four costly organizational restructurings between 2012 and 2017, which contributed to significant employee turnover, employee morale issues and grievances. As well, administrative spending rose 49% between 2012 and 2017, while spending on watershed services dropped 18% over the same period.
- Impacted by staff reductions, the NPCA is taking significantly more time to review both municipal development proposals (from an average of 16 days in 2013 to 38 days in 2017) and work-permit applications (from an average of 29 days in 2013 to 37 days in 2017).
- The NPCA does not consistently track or respond to complaints about potential violations (e.g., when wetlands are destroyed or debris is dumped in waterways) within its jurisdiction. One-quarter of the complaints we reviewed about possible Act violations between 2013 and 2017 were still open. Timely enforcement action is important because the NPCA has only two years under the Act to take legal action if necessary.

- The NPCA proposed a pilot project to allow provincially significant wetlands in Thundering Waters to be destroyed and to recreate a wetland area three times as large elsewhere, to facilitate development in Thundering Waters. However, the NPCA had not studied the site's ecosystem to determine if it contained unique features that cannot be replicated.
- For more than half of the \$3.8 million in purchases between 2013 and 2017 that we reviewed, the NPCA did not adhere to its own policies for the competitive acquisition of goods and services.

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Visit www.auditor.on.ca to read the Report.

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